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## POLITICS

# Sheboygan leader uses racist slur in meeting, then city administrator's response raises more concerns



**Maya Hilty**

Sheboygan Press

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**SHEBOYGAN** - A city director's use of an offensive term for Black people and the way the Sheboygan administrator responded have exacerbated what residents say are persistent equity issues at City Hall.

Chad Pelishek, Sheboygan's director of Planning and Development, said the N-word during an internal meeting of department heads in August.

Pelishek said the slur while quoting a resident's comment from a neighborhood meeting. He used the offensive word as an example of a racist incident brought to his attention and asked other department heads how the city can help address racial issues at the neighborhood level, City Administrator Todd Wolf said.

Wolf was concerned not that a white department head repeated the racist term but that other staff members told people outside the meeting about the incident.

"(Pelishek) thought he was in a safe space — and obviously one person let that out to their friends group," Wolf said. He said he was "disappointed" in a director who "let the information out."

Wolf added, "I don't want to see this employee (Pelishek) have a big tarnish on them for something that's not fair."

Wolf's reaction to the use of the offensive word in a city meeting has created concerns of its own.

“(Pelishek's) misstep is one thing,” said Ale Guevara, a Sheboygan resident who said community members already have been concerned about equity and inclusion issues in city government. “But their (city leaders') inability to deal with it reflects the deeper underlying issues that are happening.

“We don't believe in retribution. This is not about ‘How is Mr. Pelishek going to be punished?’” Guevara said. “This is about, when are they going to do something to correct this, instead of hiding it? When are they going to do something about the toxicity in the city?”

As city administrator, Wolf is the primary person to address complaints about staff conduct because Sheboygan has no human resources director, said city council member Trey Mitchell, chairman of the Finance and Personnel Committee.

The human resources position has been vacant since former director Vicky Schneider resigned in June after suing the city, alleging Wolf retaliated against her for opposing sexual harassment of a female city employee, according to her complaint filed with the state Department of Workforce Development.

As of Friday, the state agency had not responded to a question of whether Schneider's case remains open.

Pelishek referred a reporter to the mayor and city administrator for comment.

As director of Planning and Development, Pelishek works with developers and local businesses, oversees code enforcement and community development block grant funding, attends city meetings and helps with programming, Wolf said.

Pelishek has been the department director since 2010, according to his LinkedIn profile.

Pelishek — whom Wolf called the “poster boy” of “other duties as assigned” — is also sustainability coordinator and sits on multiple boards and commissions, serving as chairman of the Sustainable Task Force and Sheboygan Area Room Tax Commission. He developed the city's first strategic plan and is chairman of the current revision of the plan, Wolf said.

## **Director to peers: 'I am sorry if you were offended'**

In the August department head meeting, no one spoke up after Pelishek repeated the slur, Wolf said.

The vast majority of department heads are white. At least one is Black.

After the meeting, Wolf emailed department heads apologizing for not immediately correcting a “misstep from a team member” but said the statement with the slur was not intended to be offensive. His email did not mention Pelishek by name.

In an interview with the Sheboygan Press, Wolf wavered on whether Pelishek using the slur was acceptable given the context.

“He did use the phrase, not with the intent to hurt or harm anyone, but with the intent to help others understand,” Wolf said. “You start going, well, what’s the N-word? What’s the R-word? ... It’s like, how do you get people to understand what you’re talking about that’s not acceptable (to say)?”

Wolf later said, “Racial slurs, my team already knows that’s not acceptable, even in the context of educating and communicating.”

Pelishek emailed a brief apology to department heads the morning after saying the slur.

“I regret saying [sic] full N word out loud and if I offended anyone it was not intended to be directed that way. I am sorry if you were offended,” he wrote.

Pelishek’s apology and Wolf’s response both fell short, Guevara said.

“‘I’m sorry if you felt offended?’ No, ‘I’m sorry if I offended you. I need to learn,’” she said. “And nobody checks his response to make sure he’s doing it the right way? To me, that’s negligence. So it goes beyond the misstep.”

City leaders should show not only that they are sorry, but that they are willing to do something about it, Guevara said.

“Show us that you really care,” she said. “They need to start protecting the people they are working with and the people they are working for. Because really, their bosses are the community members. Many voices are still not heard, and we don’t see change.”

Mayor Ryan Sorenson, who was not at the meeting in which Pelishek said the slur, said he cannot speak on personnel issues when asked if Pelishek was reprimanded, and is "not primarily responsible for human resources-type issues like this."

The incident was "a learning opportunity, not only for (Pelishek), but for everyone else," Sorenson said. "I think this is a reflection of how we can do better and how we can raise the bar for our team and understand what is appropriate and what's not appropriate in these conversations."

**More:** WNBPA to NBA, WNBA commissioners on Robert Sarver: It is never too late to do the right thing

## **Expert: Why this slur, said by a white person, hurts no matter the context**

Whether retelling a story or not, it is not OK for white people to say the N-word, which was derived from the Latin word for the color black and turned into a derogatory term for enslaved people, said Leslie Laster, Director for Diversity, Accessibility and Support Services at Moraine Park Technical College.

“Some Black people, not all, use the word and have reclaimed it,” Laster said. “All Black people don’t agree with that, but some do, and it was just a way to say, ‘You can’t hurt me with this word anymore.’”

“Everyone knows what the word is, and it is just as easy to say ‘the N-word,’” she said. “It comes down to education and empathy.”

Someone should have addressed it immediately in the meeting and later checked in on everyone in the meeting, Laster said.

“You also can’t assume that that word isn’t going to offend people, even if everyone in the room were white — you know, because of who they love, who they’re associated with, who their friends are,” she said.

“That doesn’t create a safe meeting. That creates a meeting for certain people to say certain things, and that’s not how you create psychological safety in the workplace.”

## **Administrator focuses on the leak, not the slur**

The day Pelishek used the racist word, Wolf told department heads not to talk about "departmental interactions" with other people.

"Please remember that our Department head meetings are to help us learn together, but only topics are to be shared with your departments," he wrote in an email. "The departmental interactions and discussions are part of the safe space that we all need. Please feel free to contact me to discuss further to help clarify and show support. Thanks for your continued support in making the City a great place of belonging."

Within the next few days, Wolf hired a diversity, equity and inclusion consultant to facilitate an "emergency meeting" with department heads, he said.

Sorenson said the meeting with the DEI consultant was to reaffirm the city's commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion work going forward.

"It was to say this was a situation that was not correct, and set the expectation for the senior leadership team of how we move forward and get better from it," Sorenson said.

Wolf said his concern was that a staff member talked about the incident outside of the department head meeting.

"People knew there was a breach of trust, and I just wanted them to understand that moving forward, we still want (department meetings) to be a space of trust," he said in response to a question about what the meeting with the DEI consultant addressed.

"Part of DEI is ... the understanding that we can and should be able to make a mistake but have a safe enough space that we can support each other through it," he said.

"We didn't know that some information was out until I talked with you, and it's like, the mayor and I were beside ourselves," Wolf told a reporter.

Wolf said he reached out to staff members, including a department head who is Black, "apologizing, things like that, saying, 'Hey, I hope you understand. I just don't want to see this blow up anymore.'"

City leaders are not trying to hide what happened but are concerned that Pelishek's comment is being taken out of context, Wolf said.

"Depending on how the (newspaper article) is written, we're going to reprimand further a good employee, and we're going to end up trashing another employee who obviously let the comment out," he said. "That employee is going to have problems because let's just face it, people are not going to trust the safe space anymore."

All city directors contacted by the Sheboygan Press declined to comment or referred a reporter to the mayor and city administrator for comment.

**More:** Post-2020, Sheboygan County businesses strengthen their commitments to diversity, equity and inclusion

**More:** Most of Sheboygan's city council members are new in the past three years. Here's a look at age, gender and racial diversity on the council.

## Diversity and inclusion are priorities, city leaders say

Better serving Sheboygan's increasingly diverse community is something Sorenson campaigned on as mayor last year, he said.

Wolf also said promoting diversity, equity and inclusion is a focus for Sheboygan leaders.

About one in three people in Sheboygan (31%) is Latino, Asian, multiracial or Black, including about 1,630 city residents who identify as Black or African American and an additional 3,950 residents who are multiracial, according to the 2020 U.S. Census.

In the past two years, the city has done a lot to promote diversity and inclusion — or ensure that people of different backgrounds are treated fairly and feel comfortable and valued — while that was not a focus in the past, Sorenson and Wolf said.

Last year, the city required all employees to attend a DEI workshop about creating authentic relationships in the workplace and initiated mandatory annual trainings for all employees that include anti-harassment training. Managers also participated in a virtual training about othering and belonging, Sorenson said.

This year, the city implemented leadership trainings for 40 managers and supervisors that include topics such as inclusive leadership. The city has also offered optional trainings related to queer identities, disabilities and other topics, and is consulting with UW-Green Bay for further training opportunities, Sorenson said.

Since 2021, the city has also implemented a language line for all city services, updated the wording in job postings to reach a broader audience and initiated a DEI assessment of internal policies.

The city is incorporating diversity, equity and inclusion concepts into Sheboygan's strategic plan, integrating DEI language into the employee handbook and annual reviews, and updating pronoun language in the municipal code, Sorenson said.

“The big point I want to hammer home is we still have a ton more work to do,” he said.

“We have a lot more work to do internally, setting the standard higher not only for our senior leadership team, where the bar needs to be the highest it can be, but also for all 400-plus city staff, to make sure that we're providing equitable, responsible resources to the citizens of Sheboygan,” Sorenson said.



“(Diversity and inclusion) is everybody’s responsibility. It’s woven within a lot of the work that we do.”

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# Sheboygan Press.

LOCAL

## 'People are angry': Sheboygan residents, elected officials respond to city administrator's handling of director repeating a racial slur



**Maya Hilty**

Sheboygan Press

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SHEBOYGAN - Sheboygan is in the midst of "a public and employee relations nightmare," city council person Betty Ackley said at the city council meeting last week.

That's after a city director repeated a racial slur in an internal meeting and the Sheboygan Press reported on the city's response to concerns from other staff.

The city council discussed personnel issues in closed session on Monday and last week.

Mayor Ryan Sorenson assured a crowded room at a council meeting last week that elected officials are listening to residents' concerns, while the council voiced support for equity and government transparency.

The council also drafted a resolution limiting City Administrator Todd Wolf's responsibilities, and instead giving Sorenson full responsibility for talking to the media as well as putting the process for hiring a director of Human Resources firmly in the hands of the mayor and council leadership.

The council "wishes to have the Mayor and the City Administrator focus on areas of strength," the proposed resolution states.

Wolf is no longer talking to the Sheboygan Press, according to a preliminary understanding with council leadership, he wrote in an email to city council leadership obtained through an open records request.



In emails to city council members obtained by the Sheboygan Press, some residents called for a public apology from the city director who repeated the racial slur and a budget that prioritizes work in diversity, equity and inclusion, such as long-term work with a DEI professional.

Some residents asked council members to reevaluate City Director Chad Pelishek's and Wolf's fitness for their positions. Residents also emphasized the importance of hiring a Human Resources director and suggested investigating sexual harassment and workplace retaliation in the city.

Sheboygan has not had an active Human Resources director since November 2021, when the former director took leave after hiring an attorney to protect herself against workplace retaliation, she wrote in her resignation letter months later.

Sheboygan has been trying to hire a Human Resources director since the former director resigned in June. One applicant offered the position rejected the city's offer this fall. The city administrator has since hired an outside firm to assist with hiring for the position.

**More:** Sheboygan council approves \$15 minimum wage for city employees, but it may not apply to library workers. Here's what to know.

## **Here's the context in which a city director said a racial slur and how the city administrator responded.**

After a city employee and neighborhood liaison noticed a few uncomfortable and racist incidents while attending neighborhood association meetings, including a resident saying the N-word, she asked her supervisor how to address those situations if they happen again, according to emails obtained by the Sheboygan Press.

Her supervisor, Pelishek, Sheboygan's director of planning and development, asked other city staff for guidance at an August meeting of department heads. Pelishek said the N-word while saying that a resident had said the slur at a neighborhood meeting as he asked fellow staff how the city can help address such situations.

After other city staff raised concerns, Pelishek emailed an apology to department heads. Some residents say the apology missed the mark in failing to acknowledge the harm done.

"I regret saying [sic] full N word out loud and if I offended anyone it was not intended to be directed that way. I am sorry if you were offended," Pelishek wrote.

Wolf then hired a diversity, equity and inclusion consultant to facilitate a conversation about the incident with department heads.

Wolf was concerned not that a city leader repeated the racial slur but that city staff told people outside the meeting about the incident, saying a director who “let the information out” had breached trust.

## **Wolf admonishes city council for 'lack of support' in an email**

After the Sheboygan Press reported on the city’s response to Pelishek repeating a racial slur, City Council President Barbara Felde emailed all city employees reminding them of the city’s Employee Assistance Program and a method to confidentially report suspected violations of the city’s code of conduct or policies.

“While we are taking the necessary steps to address concerns, we want to extend our support to our public servants and constituents,” Felde wrote. “Please know your Common Council is on standby for support.”

The following day, Wolf emailed city council leadership, including Felde, Council Vice President Roberta Filicky-Peneski and Sorenson, saying the council has failed to support city employees.

“I have dozens of employees crying, upset and ready to quit in the lack of support from the Council in this issue and many others in the last two plus years. This includes myself for the continued harassment,” Wolf wrote.

“The only support and change that the employees have said, that has been positive for the city and them has been the hiring of me into this position,” Wolf wrote. “(Alders) do not ask the people for the facts and clarification. Now is a time for the City Leadership to stand for the team that provides the service that you represent.

“The team is even scared to talk to anyone, as this is not a safe place anymore. They know more from the outside than many know from the right people in Council leadership positions.”

Wolf previously said he was “disappointed” in a city director who told a city council member, according to emails obtained by the Sheboygan Press, that Pelishek said the racial slur in an internal meeting.



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## **City council proposes limiting city administrator's responsibilities**

A city council resolution proposed Monday "clarifying" the duties of the city administrator would effectively limit Wolf's responsibilities.

Although the city administrator is employed by the council and in charge of implementing council policies on a day-to-day basis, "the various roles of the City Administrator and the Mayor have evolved, often without much involving from the Common Council," the resolution states.

"The City Administrator has strong skills in project management, and the Common Council wishes to have him focus more time in this area of strength," it reads. "One way to do that is to direct the City Administrator to have the Mayor handle media relations and communication."

According to city ordinance, the director of Human Resources and Labor Relations is appointed by the council based on the recommendation from the city administrator and mayor.

Under the proposed resolution, the appointment would instead be "primarily directed by the Mayor and council leadership."

"Having that position filled by a strong candidate is one of the Common Council's highest priorities," the resolution reads.

The resolution will go to the Finance and Personnel Committee before returning to the full council for approval.

## **Sheboygan leaders and residents respond to concerns about city leadership and equity**

At last week's council meeting, Mayor Sorenson said equity work needs to be a "fundamental component of city operations."

"We have a lot of progress that we have made over the last couple of months, but we still have a long way to go," Sorenson said.

"I want to reassure people that the city is not a safe space for racism and racial tropes and it can never be," he said. "We have a lot of work ahead of us, I know we can do better and we will do better."

The city council passed a resolution reaffirming the council's commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging.

The council "believes that our leaders and staff need to be held to a high standard on matters of equity," "understands that leaders shall offer no excuses for offensive behavior," and "understands that leaders need to operate in full transparency and accountability," the resolution states.

Sorenson said elected officials have heard from a lot constituents on how the city can improve.

"From the calls, emails and in-person conversations with residents that I have had recently about this issue, people are angry," Ackley said. "I do not believe that (Pelishek's) communication was becoming of someone representative of the city's public face and leadership. I feel like all of us should be holding ourselves to a higher standard. We must be mindful of our words, even when quoting others.

"It is time to implement actionable change, it is not time to provide lip service," Ackley said.

Russ Otten, a Sheboygan resident and chairman of the Republican Party of Sheboygan County, said during public comment at last week's city council meeting that "it's very sad for our community that the Sheboygan Press decided to sensationalize (this situation)."

"Every one of you council members knows that what was stated by Chad Pelishek was not stated by him but a repetition of what was stated by someone else. Yet, not one of you had the guts to defend him," Otten said.

"Diversity is hugely important ... but diversity should be more than (race or gender). Diversity should be about diversity of thought," he said. "When we only have one thought, and everyone has to fall in line or be ostracized, we have a problem."

Other people in public comment and emails to city council members obtained by the Sheboygan Press called for more action by the council.



"Leadership requires the willingness to learn, the ability to model and the capacity to own one's missteps," said Jamie Haack, a resident and professional of diversity and inclusion work. "I urge the common council to seriously evaluate placements of Mr. Pelishek and Mr. Wolf and their current and future abilities to serve in their roles with the knowledge, transparency and values of equity and respect that are so needed in their positions."

Brenda Richterkessing, another resident who has worked as a human resources director and taught educational seminars about sexual harassment and workplace retaliation, said in an email to the city council that, based off reporting on Wolf's response, Wolf "is handling this in the exact opposite way than he should."

"He sounds like someone that may be in over his head in terms of his ability to manage the leadership needed in our city," Richterkessing wrote. "With no (Human Resources) director ... ironically because she is also suing the city for workplace retaliation ... this is a very dangerous crisis of leadership for our city."

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